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SUBJECT: MALAWI: ELECTION PREPARATION UPDATE

REF: LILONGWE 667 AND PREVIOUS

LILONGWE 00000701 001.2 OF 002

¶1. (SBU) Summary: With just over five months until Malawi's May elections, the registration period is limping toward the finish line with delays, material shortages and poor expenditure tracking, but with what appears to be a high-quality voter roll. Voter registration will now likely conclude in late December or early January, with the initial voters roll ready for inspection in February and final roll printed by the end of March. The MEC has announced a robust results management system plan, including a national tally center open to the media that will release local results as they come in. MEC Chairperson Justice Anastasia Msosa has also expressed support for a civil society-led parallel vote tally to help ensure confidence in the MEC's process. USG funding for NDI's support to local observers and a parallel vote tally would be a modest (\$500,000) but high-yield investment. While the MEC has extended invitations to international observers, none have yet confirmed their participation. MEC's delayed financial system installation has limited activity-level expenditure tracking, leading to concerns that there may be overspending on early activities that will create a funding shortfall as the polling date approaches. End Summary.

Materials and Equipment Problems

¶2. (SBU) The Malawi Electoral Commission continues to make progress towards May 19 general elections. Registration of voters has continued past the original November 30 completion date. The MEC confirmed it will need a seventh, two-week phase to register the final five districts. Voter registration will now likely conclude in late December or early January. However, the MEC continues to maintain it will have the initial voters roll ready for inspection in February and will print the final voters roll by the end of March.

¶3. (SBU) While resolved in the field, equipment issues remain a problem at the MEC headquarters. The breakdown of two document scanners delayed the start of registration form scanning. The MEC has compensate by going to 7x24 operations in its information technology department. The long hours and high stress have caused morale problems that could lead to staff attrition during this high workload timeframe. The high-tech system has yielded results, however, catching 35 duplicate registrants out of the 1.4 million registrants that have been processed. Many believe the fingerprint-matching technology will lead to the best voters roll in Malawi's electoral history.

Results Management Plan

14. (SBU) The MEC recently announced an ambitious plan to manage release of the results of the polls. Polling stations will have one presiding officer responsible for the entire station's results tabulation. Ballots will be counted in front of monitors, tally sheets signed, and a copy posted outside the polling station. The original result sheet will be transported by vehicle to one of 29 district seats where constituency return officers will enter the details in a computer. The officers will also scan the original signed results sheet. Both will be electronically transmitted to a national tally center in Blantyre. Monitors and MEC information technology staff will observe this data entry and transmission step. By placing the 193 constituency officers at just 29 district seats, the MEC hopes to avoid communication outages and be able to respond more quickly to technical problems.

15. (SBU) At the national tally center, the MEC plans to display voting results as they come in on a big screen monitor with live updates. Media, political parties, and other observers will be allowed to watch each polling center's results as the MEC certifies them as official. The MEC said they expect all results to be officially announced within 24 hours after the polls close. The MEC also said they will attempt to post real-time results online.

16. (SBU) At a presentation by the U.S.-based National Democratic Institute (NDI) hosted by the DCM recently on the fringes of an Electoral Institute of Southern Africa conference, MEC Chairperson Justice Anastasia Msosa also expressed support for a civil-society-led parallel vote tally (PVT) to help ensure confidence in the MEC's results management process. Major donors including the UK and Canada are currently considering whether to fund a PVT as well as

LILONGWE 00000701 002.2 OF 002

longer-term election observation by a local civil society umbrella group. (COMMENT: The USG still has provided NO FUNDING to this critical effort. END COMMENT) The MEC has also invited international observers, but no group has yet come forward.

Working with Media and Civil Society

17. (SBU) To combat the perceived bias of broadcasters, the MEC opened its media monitoring unit (MMU) in early December. The MMU will monitor both print and broadcast media and report on the accuracy and fairness of election coverage leading up to the polls. The MEC will also use the MMU to engage journalists on professional methods for covering elections. Grants to civil society organizations to perform civic and voter education, to which USAID has contributed a total of \$802,000, will also be disbursed in mid-December. Delays in disbursement will force most organizations to modify their education proposals for the campaign period only, since voter registration is almost over.

Budget Shortfalls a Concern

18. (SBU) The MEC's spending is a concern to international donors who are contributing 44% of the election's budget. Neither expenditures on additional registration equipment and supplies, nor the costs of the repeated registration extensions, were in the original budget. Additionally, the MEC's financial system installation has been delayed, leading to the use of simple spreadsheets to track expenditures. Donors remain concerned that overspending on early election activities will create funding shortfalls closer to the polling date.

19. (SBU) Comment: The MEC continues to do its best to keep the electoral process transparent and fair. Most of the current problems stem from human resource and capacity issues

brought about by neglect in the period between 2004 and 2008.

The MEC remains heavily dependent on expensive international consultants in many key areas and will likely have to extend the contracts of some due to the prolonged registration period. Moreover, the inability to accurately track activity-level spending has made it difficult to project what additional resources the MEC will need. While donors will press the MEC to turn to the GOM for budget overruns, some may find it difficult to refuse additional funding requests to safeguard their already large investments. Some donors would like to devote any additional funds to non-government election support projects such as the civil-society parallel vote tally, but without assurances that the GOM will step up to fund MEC's unidentified budget gaps, funding may come too late to implement these efforts. USG funding for NDI's support to local observers and a parallel vote tally would be a modest (\$500,000) but high-yield investment. End Comment.

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